

+ J. M. J.

My dad often forwards me pictures of various engineering feats around the world like the Millau Viaduct in France, which is the tallest vehicular bridge in the world, or the Hoover Dam Bypass Project. He especially enjoys when there are pictures like a sheet of wood spanning two unconnected spans over a 900 foot drop. In each of these modern engineering marvels the bridge was built because there was congestion and delays in taking the former route. These bridges literally made valleys filled in, made winding roads straight, and made rough ways smooth.

When Isaiah prophesied some five hundred years before Christ **“In the desert prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; The rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley”** (Isa. 40:3-4), it was common that when the king was coming to visit, a messenger was sent ahead so that dirt roads that had become pitted from the travel of ox carts and chariots could be smoothed over. Roads that were washed out would be repaired so that the king on his journey would not be inconvenienced, stuck, or delayed.

Against this backdrop St. Luke provides us a list of the political leaders of the day, Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias. A king is coming into the world. His messenger is sent, but that messenger does not come bearing power or glory. It wasn't the rulers or the powerful that announce the coming of Christ. John does not arrive with pomp and circumstance. The messenger is someone who lives in the wilderness, wears camel's hair, and eats locusts and wild honey. If the messenger comes in such humility what must the king be like?

The Church commends John's exhortation to us today. Now that we have heard the messenger we must get to work on those roads. Where is this path that must be prepared? During Morning Prayer on Tuesday the second petition was **"Prepare a path in our heart for the coming of your Word, and let his glory be revealed among us."** We know from the Gospel according to John that Jesus is the Word of God, so our prayer is that Jesus' coming at Christmas will be an arrival into our hearts. We are praying that just as Jesus changed the world by his first coming he will change me. The image of him coming into our hearts, the central organ of the body's circulatory system, is so that just as our blood permeates and nourishes our whole body, it will be Jesus who permeates and is essential to our whole being, our every activity, and our whole existence. Advent means praying for the king to rule over every part of our lives.

We pray for God's help to **"Bring low the mountains of our pride."** By pride we attribute to ourselves what is not of our nature or our doing. For example we may be the type of person that needs to have everything in control and our most common prayer to God is to get those things back on track that have suddenly slipped beyond our control. Isn't that backwards because it is God who made the entire universe? We are to do his will and not vice versa. Similarly we can be very upset with ourselves when we sin, fail, or let someone down; however, it is God's grace that sustains us and allows us to do good. Our shortcomings can be subtle hints that we need to rely more on the grace of God; furthermore, if the messenger John came in humility we too must exhibit the humility of the messenger and the king. By letting go of our pride we put God back at the center of our lives. We allow Jesus to be king.

We then beg Jesus to **“fill up the valleys of our weakness.”** It is when we recognize that we are merely creatures and we rely on the Lord for our strength that we are lifted up. St. Paul says that **“when I am weak, then I am strong”** (2 Cor. 12:10). There is much in our lives that we can't do. Sometimes the challenges are so great that our prayer is God there is no way I can handle any more. I need you. These are the precise moments where the miracles happen because we finally step out of the way and let God be God.

This morning then we ask God to show us what needs to be done so that we may be prepared for Jesus' coming, what mountains need to be made low, what valleys need to be filled in, and what pathways need to be made straight. Hear again our opening prayer and let that prayer be our own. **“God of power and mercy, open our hearts in welcome. Remove the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy, so that we may share his wisdom and become one with him when he comes in glory.”**

May God bless you.